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ABSTRACT

The New Zealand Correspondence School is a large, state-funded, national institution teaching at preschool and elementary-secondary school levels. Like the regular education system, it long has been tightly controlled, with a national syllabus, national grading and examinations, and national guidelines for interpretation of the syllabus. The school teaches a wide variety of students with special needs and includes student support systems such as extracurricular activities, camps, seminars, visiting teachers, and school publications. The school maintains strong links between teacher and parent through its expertise in teaching through an intermediary, such as a teacher in the local school, who mediates between the distance education institution and the student. Since it has a wide range of curriculum offerings, its varied teaching methods include audiovisual media, teleconferencing, kits, and project work. The school has evolved a quality management system that provides expert evaluation in course planning, writing, production, and management. The school has become expert at meeting a variety of student needs while serving large groups of students. Some examples of this diversity of needs include students who are enrolled because of distance, itinerancy, medical problems, psychological problems, or because they are overseas. In meeting these students' needs, the school considers provision of courses for nonliterate learners, student support, choice of appropriate course structure, consideration of tutor time management, and choice of an appropriate media mix. The school demonstrates that it is possible for a distance education institution to contribute in a positive and effective way toward meeting national education goals. (KC)

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A very long piece of chalk - teaching students
where they're at.

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Distance education is all about using a very long piece of chalk to teach students where they're at - both physically; on a yacht, up a mountain, in a hospital bed - and pedagogically; providing for the educational needs of students depending on their level of attainment and ability.

History and role of The Correspondence School

The Correspondence School is the only school level distance education provider in New Zealand. It is a large, state funded, national institution teaching at pre-school and school levels. It is part of the New Zealand national education system and was a branch of the New Zealand government's Department of Education.

Departmental control over the school was tight. The Department set enrolment criteria, stipulated what was to be taught and who was to be taught, set staffing levels for both teaching and non-teaching staff and set and controlled funding. Most of these controls were based on conditions, policies and practices applying to face-to-face education and could therefore be seen as constraints upon a distance education institution. It is important to note here, however, that the face-to-face national education system in New Zealand is also highly controlled and centralised. For many decades New Zealand has had a national curriculum for all levels of school education. Each subject has its own national syllabus. There are national guidelines for many subjects to help with the interpretation of the syllabus. There is a system of national public examinations and awards in the senior secondary school. And there is a national standardised system for recording each child's progress throughout their schooling. So, in fact, both distance education and the face-to-face system are tightly organised.

Throughout its history The Correspondence School's role as an equity provider for students unable to access face-to-face education has been seen as paramount by both the government, the institution as a whole and the staff working in it. This role as a support system to cater for the increasingly diverse needs of students has been a constant driving force.

The Correspondence School has evolved today to the point where it :

- teaches from pre-school to senior secondary level, with some pre-vocational level teaching.
- has a teaching staff of 400 who have had previous classroom experience, and an administration staff of 118.
- teaches special education and provides resources for special education teachers in other institutions.
- provides second chance or continuing school level education for approximately 9000 adult part-time students.
- is leading work in New Zealand on the design of courses which use modern educational technology.
- has wide-ranging and effective student support systems including extra-curricular activities, camps, seminars, form teachers, regional representatives, visiting teachers, teleconferencing and school publications.

Taken together the factors outlined above have considerable implications for The Correspondence School's approach to distance education. On the one hand there is the need to provide access to education for an increasingly diverse

range of students in an extraordinarily broad range of circumstances. On the other hand the school is constrained by its mandate to teach in a tightly controlled relationship to national educational policies and the face-to-face national education system.

This situation has been viewed by The Correspondence School as a challenge rather than a constraint. It has led to the development of philosophies, policies and strategies which provide the flexibility that the diverse nature of our student roll demands, at the same time as fulfilling the school's role as an alternative provider in the national education system.

This paper looks at some of these philosophies and strategies with particular reference to course materials.

The role of the intermediary

The Correspondence School strives to create and enhance strong links between teacher and parent. These links have both led to and arisen out of The Correspondence School's expertise in teaching through an intermediary.

Many Correspondence School students are not yet independent or literate learners. Thus materials for early childhood, primary, special education and students whose first language is not English must be designed to be imparted to the student by the home tutor or supervisor.

In the case of primary and secondary pupils who are enrolled at a face-to-face school as well as with The Correspondence School for one or more subjects, or for remedial or extension work, assistance is given to the student by a co-ordinator in the home school or by a teacher or teacher aide in the home school where appropriate.

This model of delivery using a third party who mediates between the distance education institution and the student has wide applicability for assisting education development in countries where the general level of literacy is low or where the preferred learning style involves group rather than individual study.

An interactive model of teaching and learning

The Correspondence School's role in providing basic compulsory education has meant that it has an obligation to make course materials accessible to students who have little or no choice over what they study. To achieve this the school has adopted an interactive model designed to create a one-to-one teacher student relationship. There is a strong commitment to Holmberg's "guided didactic conversation" engaging the student and supporting her in the learning process, providing extension, instant feedback, remedial loops and study skills and techniques.

Curriculum range

The New Zealand government has been and is committed to using distance education to provide access for educationally disadvantaged students. For The Correspondence School an implication of this policy has been the need to find a

way of teaching and assessing. in accordance with the requirements of national syllabuses, a wide range of subjects, some of which might normally be considered difficult to teach at a distance. Examples are workshop technology, practical art, field study work in geography, cooking as part of home economics programmes, the teaching of emergent and remedial reading and pre-school education in general.

The challenges of teaching such subjects are met in a variety of ways such as:

- use of media other than print; audio cassette, video, telephone teaching, teleconferencing and, recently, computer technology.
- use of kits or packs of materials which are sent to the student.
- use of an intermediary.
- use of carefully planned and staged project work which the student is required to report on regularly to the teacher.

Quality management systems

The Correspondence School has evolved a staged course development process which separates the phases of course planning, writing, production and management. The planning and writing phases are further broken down into stages which are marked by monitoring and approval points. This system includes expert evaluation of course plans and course materials by staff who are not actually involved in the writing of the course being evaluated. Quality assurance systems at the planning stage and quality control systems during the course writing phase have considerable importance in the development of course materials because the school does not trial resources.

Trialling is considered inefficient, impractical and inconclusive in The Correspondence School setting.

Institutional framework

The framework within which increasingly flexible course materials are developed at The Correspondence School has over recent years become more industrialised and formalised. Systems have evolved which define and integrate roles, procedures and lines of responsibility and which enable the school to fulfil a growing range of roles in a cost-effective way. It is especially important to make the best possible use of teaching time as salaries make up 77% of the school's budget. In addition there is the need to maintain efficient, easily implemented, fast, adaptable and responsive student support, resource management and administrative systems.

Meeting student needs

The Correspondence School has had to become expert in developing courses which suit groups or classes of students (for example year 2 language or year 5 mathematics) while at the same time being appropriate to the individual, specific circumstances of each student. There are many issues to consider here.

- The physical and social circumstances of Correspondence School students are enormously diverse. School aged students are enrolled for full-time

study with The Correspondence School for a variety of reasons. The main enrolment categories are:

- distance
- itinerancy
- medical
- psychological or
- overseas enrolment.

Courses and resources must be designed so that students are not disadvantaged by requirements which they cannot meet. Almost every resource a student is likely to need for a Correspondence School course must be provided by the school and the cost and logistics of this must be taken into account in planning and designing the course. The school has to find ways of providing course materials which are flexible enough to meet individual needs while conforming to a national, standardised system and while developing and producing these materials through an industrialised system in a large, complex institution.

- In the New Zealand education system students move from one class to the next with their peers through social promotion - it is unusual for a child to be kept back to repeat a class. Thus the naturally wide range of abilities and levels of achievement present in any group of children of a given age, means that students come on to The Correspondence School roll with very different levels of attainment. For example, a 6th year mathematics class might have in it students whose levels of attainment range from year 4 to year 8. Thorough backgrounding and use of pre-testing where appropriate help to determine where a student should be placed in the

school's programme. In addition courses and resources are designed to provide maximum flexibility and allow the teacher to individualise programmes as much as possible. This can be done by providing remedial loops or optional extension work within the course or by developing several resources or whole courses that are at different levels of difficulty and coverage.

- Many Correspondence School students do only part of their education with the Correspondence School. It is common for students to come from conventional schooling to distance education or vice versa. This means that Correspondence School courses must take account of what a student might already have done in face-to-face- education and also prepare the student to be able to cope well with conventional schooling.
Correspondence School students tend to have better than average reading and writing skills but lower than average oracy skills. When designing courses at basic school level opportunities for listening, speaking, researching, experimenting and socialising must be included.
- The Correspondence School teaches three distinct groups of students. Each of these different student groups has different educational requirements and The Correspondence School places considerable emphasis on careful analysis of the student profile before courses are developed.

This identification of the student group may in itself dictate aspects of instructional design and teaching methods. Some factors to be considered in ensuring that the needs of students are met are:

a provision of courses for non-literate learners

Courses may be designed to be implemented by an intermediary or may use a medium other than the printed word.

b provision of student support within course materials

The level of student support can range from very interactive courses with extensive guidance built into them and implemented by an intermediary, to self-instructional courses where some student guidance is included but there is little or no interaction with the tutor.

c choice of appropriate course structure

Course structure will depend on the content of the course, the ability of the learner to work independently and the need of the learner for an individual programme.

Course structure can range from a linear, structured course in which material must be studied in a specific order, to kitset or modular courses for learners able to make informed choices about the organisation of their studies. Item banking is another option. It allows the tutor to create individual programmes for each learner by selecting resources from a comprehensive, graded bank of resource items.

d consideration of student time management

Student time management can range from a tightly structured time allowance, for example, a one hour daily lesson, to an "open" course where the student decides on timing and frequency of work. Compulsory education such as that offered by The Correspondence School tends to dictate a structured time allowance, post-compulsory education allows for greater freedom in day-to-day management and also in overall course completion.

e consideration of tutor time management

The amount of time a tutor needs to mark work is important because fast turn around contributes greatly to student motivation. Correspondence School practice in this matter results from evidence that an encouraging personal letter with speedily returned work is a more effective motivating factor than lengthy correcting of work.

f choice of appropriate media mix

Students must have access to the required technology for whatever medium is chosen. The choice of medium must also be appropriate to the content of the course. For example, a communicative language course requires that the student has access to a cassette recorder. These are provided to full-time students where necessary.

Conclusion

This paper has looked at how The Correspondence School's history and role have affected philosophies and practices in the areas of:

- teaching through an intermediary
- an interactive model of teaching and learning
- curriculum range
- quality management systems
- institutional framework
- meeting student needs

Particular emphasis has been given to the issue of meeting student needs for two reasons. Firstly, because flexibility and individualisation are two of the greatest strengths of distance education. Secondly, because the Correspondence School's experience shows that flexibility can be achieved even within a relatively rigid national framework and a tight institutional framework.

Consideration of these issues shows that it is possible for a distance education institution to contribute in a positive and effective way towards meeting national education goals.